

by Craig Simons

Liu Min (*leo meen*), 15, lives with her parents, cats, and a dog in Liaoja village, a town of several hundred people in China's Sichuan (*SECH-wan*) province. Min lives in a concrete house in the midst of rice paddies, which stretch almost to the Lius' front door. (In China, people say their family names first.) When her father, a farmer, takes Min to school on his motorcycle each morning, she watches water buffalo plow the neighbors' fields.

Most days, Min rises at 6 o'clock to make breakfast, usually rice with milk. When she gets to school an hour later, she starts to study.

Words to Know

- **collectivize**: put under state control.
- **Communist**: a type of government that controls all aspects of the economy and abolishes private ownership.
- **Cultural Revolution**: a movement designed to eliminate antigovernment influences in China's institutions and leadership.
- **trade deficit**: the annual amount that a country—its people, companies, and government agencies—spends on foreign products, minus the amount that foreign countries spend on its products.

School is the center of Min's life. Except for Sundays, she stays there until 10 o'clock every night. Her classes include Chinese literature, physics, chemistry, English, and math. She likes English because, she says, "it's interesting and useful."

Min's school of 2,000 students doesn't have many resources. There are only a few computers, and Min has never used the Internet. There aren't even heaters; in the winter, she wears gloves and a hat during class.

Nearly 65 percent of China's 1.3 billion people (one fifth of the world's population) live in the countryside. Most of them earn only the equivalent of a few hundred U.S. dollars a year. For Min, money is tight, and her world is small. She has never traveled farther than Chengdu (*chung-DOO*), the capital of Sichuan province, which is an hour away by bus.

A Growing Middle Class

Qing Lang (*ching long*), 13, lives several hundred miles away in Chongqing (*chung-CHING*). The city of 10 million people is on the banks of the Chang Jiang (Yangtze

River), the world's third-longest river.

Both of Lang's parents are journalists. The family has an apartment on the top floor of an eight-story building. Because there is no elevator, Lang says, "we get a lot of exercise every day."

The Qing family is part of China's new middle class. Lang attends one of Chongqing's best middle schools. Built by a wealthy entrepreneur, the school has modern science labs and lots of computers.

Lang's favorite class is computer science. "After we finish our work," he told JS, "the teacher lets us play games." On weekends, he likes to watch movies—especially scary ones—and to eat at McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants.

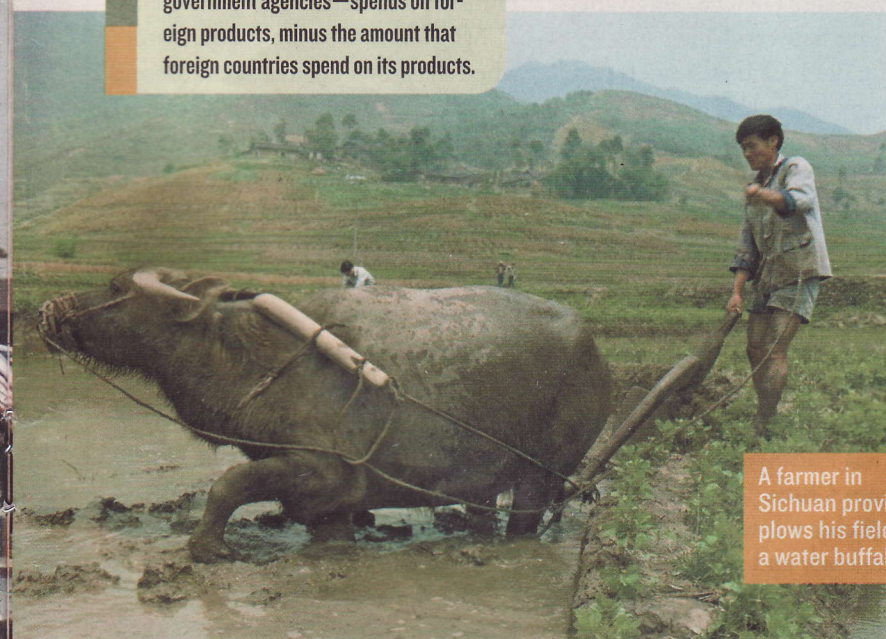
Lang and Min come from different economic backgrounds, but both spend most of their time studying. China has so many people, there is room for only a small percentage of students at universities. Lang and Min agree that there is a lot of pressure on them to get good grades.

The Cultural Revolution

Today, modern China is just emerging from its economic dark ages. When the Chinese **Communist** Party seized power in 1949, the government took land and money from landlords and wealthy people. It abolished private property and forced farmers to work together on **collectivized** farms.

The economic changes led to disaster. Food production dropped. During a famine between 1959 and 1962, at least 20 million people starved to death. At the same time, China's industries lagged far behind the rest of the world's.

In 1966, Mao Zedong (*mow zeh-dawng*), leader of the Communist Party, launched the **Cultural Revo-**



A farmer in Sichuan province plows his field using a water buffalo.